

THE BRISTOL  
SLAVE TRADERS:  
A COLLECTIVE PORTRAIT

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## TWENTY FIVE YEARS

*The Bristol Slave Traders* is the sixtieth pamphlet to be produced by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association and it marks the completion of the first twenty five years of publication. The series began in 1960 at the suggestion of Mr Peter Harris. The initial capital was about £100 raised partly by donations from members and partly by grants from three public bodies. The first pamphlet was *The Bristol Hotwell* by Vincent Waite and the price was two shillings.

The Bristol Branch of the Historical Association wishes to thank the authors whose expert knowledge has made the pamphlets such a valuable contribution to the history of Bristol. It would also like to express its gratitude to the numerous individuals and institutions which have given generous help and support to the enterprise. It is particularly grateful to Mr Peter Harris whose energy and enthusiasm as assistant editor and business manager have ensured that the pamphlets reach a wide market locally and nationally.

This Diamond Jubilee number is the work of Mr David Richardson, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Economic and Social History in the University of Hull. Mr Richardson has for a number of years been collecting information about some 2,000 voyages from Bristol to Africa, and the first of his volumes giving details of the voyages will be published by Bristol Record Society in 1986.

The Branch wishes to thank Miss Mary Williams and the Bristol City Record Office, Mr Gordon Kelsey and the Arts Photographic Unit of the University of Bristol, and Mr Peter Harris for help with the illustrations.

The next pamphlet will commemorate the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the influx of Huguenot refugees into Bristol in 1685, and this will be followed by a pamphlet on the passing in 1835 of the bill to establish the Great Western Railway.

The pamphlets may be obtained from the Porters' Lodge of the Wills Memorial Building, from the shop in the Bristol Museum, from most Bristol booksellers or direct from Mr Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9. Orders for the next ten pamphlets (61-70) may be placed now with Mr Harris, price £10.00 post free.

# THE BRISTOL SLAVE TRADERS: A COLLECTIVE PORTRAIT

Although Bristol was periodically involved in trade with Africa from the sixteenth century onwards, the port's regular participation in the African slave trade appears effectively to have dated from the ending of the London-based Royal African Company's monopoly of English trade with West Africa in 1698. Between this date and the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 over 2,000 vessels set out from Bristol in search of slaves on the African coast, making Bristol one of the three major British slaving ports during the eighteenth century. The purpose of this pamphlet is to trace the growth of Bristol's interest in the trade; to assess briefly its contribution to the expansion of the port's trade and shipping during the century; and finally to examine in some detail the organisation of the trade. The last will include an analysis of the major Bristol participants in this infamous business.

Information obtained from shipping records, customs accounts and newspapers reveals that some 2,108 slaving ventures were fitted out in Bristol between 1698 and 1807, an average of just over 20 ventures per year.<sup>1</sup> As the mean loading of vessels on the coast appears to have been in excess of 250 slaves during the eighteenth century, Bristol traders were responsible therefore for carrying probably over half a million blacks from the African coast during the era of 'open trade' from 1698 to 1807. Recent research has indicated, by comparison, that British ships in general loaded almost 2.8 million slaves on the coast during more or less the same period.<sup>2</sup> Accounting, according to these figures, for about one-fifth

1. I expect to publish shortly a paper on the volume of the British slave trade which will distinguish the contribution of each of the various ports involved in it.
2. P.E. Lovejoy, 'The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis', *Journal of African History*, 23 (1982), pp. 473-501.

of the eighteenth-century British slave trade, Bristol was certainly less important than Liverpool and perhaps also London as a slaving port, but was undoubtedly more important than all the remaining British slaving ports such as Lancaster and Whitehaven put together.<sup>3</sup>

Overshadowed in general by Liverpool, Bristol nevertheless probably had a greater impact on the growth of the eighteenth-century British slave trade than these aggregate statistics would suggest. The level of the port's involvement in the trade varied in fact considerably over time, and as a result its share of the British slave trade fluctuated sharply during the century. Bristol's initial entry into the trade after 1698 was understandably modest, given the very limited exposure of the port's merchants to it under the Company's monopoly and, in 1702, the outbreak of the War of Spanish Succession, which not only disrupted normal trade and shipping routes, but created attractive alternative investment opportunities such as privateering. In these circumstances, the fact that during the first decade after 1698 Bristol traders dispatched no more than four vessels a year to the African coast for slaves – or less than a tenth of the number fitted out by private traders and Company combined in London – is perhaps hardly surprising. Bristol was, however, the first of the outports to show a regular interest in the slave trade. Moreover, it soon began to expand it substantially. Between 1708 and 1712, the last five complete years of the War of Spanish Succession, the number of slave ships leaving Bristol rose to 13 a year, and expansion continued largely unabated during the two decades after the Treaty of Utrecht, with annual clearances of slave ships from the port roughly doubling every ten years. By the early 1720s up to 25 ships a year were setting out from Bristol on slaving voyages, and their number rose to 48 each year between 1728 and 1732. Liverpool's slave trade, in the meantime, had also increased, though at a slower rate than Bristol's, whilst London's trade had actually declined; clearances of slave ships each year from these two ports averaged 16 and 33 respectively between 1728 and 1732. Providing much of the impetus behind the growth of British slave trading between 1713 and 1730, Bristol accounted by the latter date for almost half of the ships clearing for Africa for slaves from the three leading slaving

3. J.A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (N.Y., 1981), pp. 219–246.

ports and had already displaced London as the premier British port concerned with the trade.

Bristol's ascendancy proved to be relatively short-lived, however. By 1738 Liverpool was strongly contesting Bristol's leadership, and from 1744 onwards succeeded its south-western rival as Britain's major slaving port, a position it never relinquished until the trade was abolished in 1807. Between the mid-1740s and 1807 in fact the gap between Liverpool and Bristol as slaving ports widened as clearances from Liverpool to Africa continued to rise steadily in peace-time up to and beyond the War of American Independence, reaching over 90 a year on average in the early 1770s, the 1790s and the 1800s, whilst annual clearances from Bristol tended to fall. Particularly acute slumps in the latter's slave trade occurred in wartime, notably in 1744-6 and 1755-8 when clearances to Africa fell below 15 annually and in 1776-82 and 1795-1807 when they were regularly below five a year. But even in peace-time Bristol's slave trade failed after 1748 to return to the levels it had attained in the decade before 1739. Whereas over 40 ships sailed annually from Bristol on slaving voyages during the 1730s, fewer than 30 tended to do so in peace-time after 1748. Set against the rising level of Liverpool clearances, these trends in Bristol clearances for Africa meant that the latter's contribution to the British slave trade inevitably declined sharply during the sixty years before abolition. Available statistics indicate that from a peak of around 45 per cent during the fourth decade of the century, Bristol's share of the British slave trade slumped to almost 25 per cent in the early 1750s, to just over 10 per cent on the eve of the War of American Independence, and finally to under 2 per cent in the decade before abolition. Not surprisingly, when abolition came in 1807, it caused little obvious anxiety in the Bristol merchant community.

A trade of limited direct importance to Bristol in the quarter century after the War of American Independence, the slave trade nevertheless contributed substantially to the expansion of Bristol's overseas trade and shipping in the quarter century before 1739. Some indication of its importance may be obtained by comparing the number of ships clearing on slaving voyages with total annual clearances to overseas destinations. Unfortunately there is no readily-available series of statistics relating to total annual clearances from Bristol for the whole eighteenth century, but figures are available for several years between 1715 and 1787. These, together with the corresponding information about clearances of

slave ships, are set out in Table I, and show that for most of this period slavers constituted 4 to 9 per cent of annual clearances from the port but rose to approximately 12 per cent of clearances at the height of Bristol's involvement in the trade around 1730. Correcting to some extent the popular notion that the fortunes of eighteenth-century Bristol rested overwhelmingly on the slave trade, these clearance data nevertheless under-estimate the full significance of the trade to the port. In seeking to evaluate them one needs to recognise that slave ships were generally larger in size and more expensively equipped than most vessels leaving Bristol and also took longer than other vessels to complete their voyages.<sup>4</sup> Vessels employed in the Irish trade, for instance, might undertake several voyages between Bristol and Ireland in the course of a single year, whereas slave ships normally took around 15 months to complete a single voyage. Slave ships, therefore, undoubtedly constituted a higher proportion of vessels owned in and sailing from Bristol than clearance data would suggest.

TABLE I: *Average Annual Clearances of Ships from Bristol, distinguishing slave ships from all others, for selected years, 1715 to 1787*

Years	Total Average Annual Clearances	Annual Clearances of slave ships	Slave Ships as per- centage of Clearances
1715-17	346	21	6.1
1728-32	405 <sup>1</sup>	48	11.9
1754-5	348 <sup>1</sup>	27	7.8
1764	343	32	9.3
1787	448	30	6.7

#### 1. Entries of vessels

Sources: Total clearances: 1715-17, P.R.O. CO 390/8B; 1728-32, 1754-5, Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers, Wharfage Books; 1764, 1787, W.E. Minchinton (ed.), *The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, Bristol Record Society's Publications, 20 (1957), p. 181.

Data on slave ships: see bibliography

In addition to its disproportionate effect on shipping, the slave trade helped to stimulate both directly and indirectly the growth of other trades in which Bristol was involved. The demand for trade goods for shipment to the African coast, for example, encouraged

4. See below page 7 for size of slave ships.

both the expansion of local industries such as brass, copper, glassware and gunpowder, all of which experienced notable growth during the eighteenth century, and the strengthening of Bristol's commercial links with various parts of Europe.<sup>5</sup> Information from customs records and merchants' accounts reveals that between a third and a half of Bristol's exports to Africa during the eighteenth century usually consisted of re-exported foreign goods. The largest category of such goods was cotton textiles purchased from the London warehouses of the East India Company, but other prominent re-exports to Africa included Swedish bar iron, Italian beads and German linens, all of which were normally imported directly from Continental suppliers before being re-shipped to the African coast.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, by providing labour to New World planters and vessels for freighting their produce to Britain, slave traders contributed to the increase in the level of sugar and other imports into Bristol during the eighteenth century. Available evidence suggests that in the half century before the War of American Independence sugar imports alone into Bristol almost doubled, from 10,000 to 20,000 hogsheads a year, and gave employment to over 20 per cent of the total annual tonnage of vessels entering Bristol from overseas.<sup>7</sup> What proportion of these imports was carried by slave ships returning home from the Caribbean is difficult to assess with complete accuracy, but if one assumes that no more than two-thirds of Bristol slavers discharged their human cargoes in the sugar islands and returned home with only half the loads of sugar attained on average by direct or bilateral traders between Bristol and the West Indies – both perhaps conservative assumptions – then slavers accounted for some 10 to 15 per cent of Bristol's sugar imports in the half century

5. On local industries see, for example, B.J. Buchanan and M.T. Tucker, 'The Manufacture of Gunpowder: a Study of the Documentary and Physical Evidence Relating to the Woolley Powder Works near Bath', *Industrial Archaeology Review*, 5 (1980-1), pp. 198-199.
6. See my 'West African Consumption Patterns and Their Influence on the Eighteenth-Century English Slave Trade', in *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. H.A. Gemery and J.S. Hogendorn (N.Y., 1979), pp. 307-309.
7. Estimates of sugar imports for the 1720s based on tonnage of vessels entering Bristol from the Caribbean as given in P.R.O. Treasury Miscellaneous, T64/276 A, f.271. I assumed an average loading of 1.5 hogshead of sugar per ton. I am indebted to Dr K. Morgan for information on sugar imports at Bristol just prior to the War of Independence.



up to 1776.<sup>8</sup> Linked to other expanding Bristol trades and activities, the slave trade at its height at least made a substantial contribution to the city's general commercial expansion.

Reference to the length of voyages and their connection with other trades serves to remind one that slaving ventures were complex commercial enterprises by eighteenth-century standards. To begin with they required from investors a substantial financial outlay, often lasting for several years. Detailed information about investment levels per venture is scarce, but various sources indicate that the average initial outlay on Bristol ventures rose from about £2,500 in 1710 to £5,000 by mid-century and to £7,300 in the decade after 1783. As prices generally remained stable over this period, real investment per slaving venture at Bristol almost tripled during the eighteenth century. Modest by comparison with the cost, say, of East Indian ventures, outlays on which often exceeded £10,000,<sup>9</sup> outlays on slaving ventures still represented a larger financial commitment than outport merchants normally undertook when they fitted out ventures to Ireland, Europe or even the Americas. Several factors contributed to the inflation of outlays on slaving voyages. Unlike most trades, vessels used in the slave trade were almost invariably owned rather than chartered by Bristol traders. The reason for this is unclear, but it was possibly related in part to the authority which ownership of the vessel gave to investors over the appointment and control of the master who, in the absence of resident Bristol factors on the African coast, assumed responsibility for the purchase of slaves. A further reason for owning vessels may have been that fitting out slaving ventures necessitated unusually heavy expenditure on provisions and special equipment such as nets, manacles, water butts, medicines and firearms, in order to support the large crews (often numbering over 30) that slavers carried and to assist them in supervising, treating and feeding slaves during the Atlantic crossing from West Africa to the New World. In addition, expenditure on the trade goods exchanged for slaves on the coast tended to rise as the century progressed. In part this reflected the growth in size and carrying-capacity of Bristol slave ships, from less than 90 tons on

8. On loadings of slave and sugar vessels, see W.E. Minchinton, 'The Triangular Trade Revisited', in *Uncommon Market*, ed. Gemery and Hogendorn, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-343.

9. L.S. Sutherland, *A London Merchant 1695-1774* (London, 1933; 1962 reprint), p. 119; C. Gill, *Merchants and Mariners of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1961), p. 62.



average before 1720 to around 135 tons by the early 1780s. It also reflected, however, the intensity of international competition for slaves and its impact on the real price of slaves on the African coast. The evidence suggests that the price of adult male slaves in West Africa probably doubled during the eighteenth century, from £9 per head before 1710 to £18 after 1783, whereas the prices of trade goods shipped out from Bristol to the coast remained relatively steady.<sup>10</sup> Faced with apparently deteriorating terms of trade in West Africa, Bristol slave traders were thus obliged during the eighteenth century to dispatch progressively larger quantities of trade goods to the coast for each slave they sought to purchase.

The size of average outlays per venture and the number of annual clearances to Africa suggest that in peacetime at least Bristolians rarely invested less than £100,000 a year in slaving ventures during the eighteenth century, and that at its peak around 1730 this sum was probably in excess of £150,000. The returns they achieved on this investment were probably much lower than historians have tended to assume. Recent research based largely on the accounts of Liverpool merchants, arguably the most successful British slave traders, has shown that profits from slaving ventures fluctuated widely from voyage to voyage but on average were less than 10 per cent net per annum.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, few complete accounts have survived for Bristol slaving voyages, and as a result it is difficult to establish with any confidence the average returns achieved by Bristol investors. However, the surviving accounts do confirm the highly volatile nature of profits accruing to Bristol slave traders. Take, for example, the voyage of the *Molly* in 1750–1, owned by Richard Meyler and Co., and the voyages of the *Crescent* and the *Sarah* in 1789, both fitted out by James Rogers and Co. Commanded by John Fowler, the *Molly* cost almost £5,700 to fit out in 1750, but produced a loss of some £250 on the original outlay when the accounts of her voyage were finally

10. On slave prices see *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. B.J. Wattenberg (N.Y., 1976), p. 1174; Report of the Lords of Committee of Council concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa (1789), part 4, account no.25.
11. Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760–1810* (London, 1975), pp. 38–57; David Richardson, 'Profits in the Liverpool Slave Trade: the Accounts of William Davenport, 1757–1784', in *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade and Abolition*, ed. Roger Anstey and P.E.H. Hair, for Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (Liverpool, 1976), pp. 60–90.

settled. Even greater was the financial loss resulting from the *Sarah's* voyage in 1789, for the net proceeds of her venture were £4,866 on an original outlay of £6,135. Rogers and Co. were more than compensated for this loss by their returns from the *Crescent's* voyage, which yielded profits of £2,159 on an outlay of £8,876.<sup>12</sup>

Such wide variations in financial returns, even from more or less simultaneous ventures, reflected the problematical and precarious nature of the slave trade. Linking three continents, slaving voyages essentially involved the purchase of black labourers in West Africa, their transport by sailing ship across over 3,000 miles or so of the Atlantic Ocean, and their sale to New World planters engaged in the cultivation of sugar, tobacco, rice, indigo and other crops largely for consumption in Europe. Each stage of the voyage contained potentially serious obstacles to the successful financial outcome of the venture, and investors accordingly made elaborate plans and preparations for surmounting them. Competition for slaves on the coast, for instance, together with the differences between local African demands for imported goods, led Bristol merchants to select cargoes of trade goods with great care in order to avert the risks of prolonged delays in purchasing slaves.<sup>13</sup> The complexities surrounding slave purchasing, furthermore, made the appointment of a master who combined the skills of sailor, diplomat and supercargo absolutely vital. To facilitate the transport of slaves across the Atlantic with the minimal loss of life possible, plans were laid for procuring fresh provisions and water at the coast, and specialist officers and tradesmen such as surgeons and carpenters were engaged in order to offer medical treatment to the slaves and to construct facilities for housing them whilst they were on board ship. Finally, in order to expedite both the sale of slaves to planters and the safe remittance of the proceeds arrangements were made for masters to enlist the advice and assistance of commission agents residing in the various markets for slaves in the New World. In some instances, these agents were related to Bristol slave traders or were themselves investors in Bristol slaving ventures.

The scale and persistence of Bristol's participation in the slave

12. Bristol Record Office, Account Book of Snow *Molly*, Bright family papers; P.R.O. Chancery Masters' Exhibits, C 107/13. I am grateful to the City Archivist of the Bristol Record Office, Miss M.E. Williams, for bringing the *Molly's* accounts to my attention and for permission to use them.
13. Richardson, 'Consumption patterns', *op. cit.*, p. 310.

trade suggest that the preparations undertaken to handle the problems associated with it helped to ensure a satisfactory financial outcome for most of the ventures dispatched from the port. There seems little doubt, however, that a significant proportion of ventures – perhaps as many as a third – failed to yield profits.<sup>14</sup> The indications are that as a result of shipwreck, slave rebellion and other disasters some 8 per cent of Bristol slavers were lost in peacetime before completing their voyages and losses were sometimes even higher in wartime; many of these vessels were probably under-insured or, before 1750 especially, not insured at all.<sup>15</sup> As we saw earlier with the *Molly* and *Sarah*, however, completion of the triangular voyage did not always guarantee financial success, for factors beyond the traders' control might easily disrupt their plans. Although African suppliers appear in general to have responded positively to external demands for slaves during the eighteenth century, wars and political changes in the interior as well as inclement weather at the coast frequently interrupted the delivery of slaves to vessels moored off-shore. The evidence suggests that most Bristol vessels obtained an acceptable complement of slaves within two to six months of arriving on the coast but it was not unknown for vessels to spend considerably longer procuring slaves; the *Pearl*, for instance, spent over nine months at Old Calabar in 1790–1 obtaining her loading of slaves, a stay that proved very detrimental to the health of both slaves and crew alike.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, on their journey to the coast slaves might pass through new disease environments and, given the comparatively primitive state of medical knowledge and the questionable skills of many ships' surgeons, it was hardly surprising that epidemics and dysentery on board ship sometimes led to appalling levels of mortality amongst the slaves and even the crew during the middle passage. Information about slave mortality levels on Bristol ships is sparse but recent research on London and Liverpool vessels has revealed that slave mortality in the crossing fell from perhaps 15 to 20 per cent at the beginning of the century to around 10 per cent or less after 1783.<sup>17</sup> Such figures, however, disguise major variations in mortality experiences from voyage to voyage and from one

14. Richardson, 'Davenport', *op. cit.*, p. 77.

15. Rates of loss of slave ships based on reports in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* from 1768 to 1775.

16. P.R.O. C 107/12.

17. Rawley, *op. cit.*, pp. 289–290.

trading location on the African coast to another. It is probable that the great majority of Bristol slavers escaped with what their owners would regard as tolerable levels of mortality of 10 per cent or less, but some ventures were doubtless ruined financially by uncontrollable and heavy slave mortality in the Atlantic crossing. Thus, for instance, the financial failure of the *Sarah's* voyage in 1789 which was noted earlier almost certainly stemmed primarily from the death by 'flux and fever' of 80 of the vessel's 222 slaves during her passage from Bonny in the Niger Delta to Barbados.

Even when vessels reached the New World without abnormal delays or slave mortality, financial success was still not certain, for the conditions upon which slaves were sold to planters and the ability of the master and resident commission agent to obtain a freight home for Bristol could both influence strongly the outcome of slaving voyages. How satisfactorily these problems were resolved depended to a large degree on the timing of the slaver's arrival in the New World in relation to the local harvest season, the state of the harvest, and the prospects for planters' crops in European and British markets. Terms of sale were also affected, however, by the insistence of most planters upon credit when buying slaves, anticipating the revenues from both their current and future crops in order to secure it. The size of such revenues depended on the vagaries of the local weather and fluctuations in markets for plantation produce neither of which were subject to the planters' control, and in these circumstances over-optimism on the part of planters could quickly lead them into accumulating large debts to Bristol slave traders. How much credit Bristol traders found themselves advancing to planters is difficult to assess, but it was evidently not insignificant, and probably amounted to a quarter or more of the selling price of slaves. Thus, in writing to Isaac Hobhouse in October 1729, Richard Assheton, a Jamaican slave factor, claimed that he had not 'been short in Remitting; The 6/8 of all our Guinea Men, is made good with what we have advised, and are now shipping, save the Mercury'; he concluded with the promise to 'endeavour to close every little That's depending as soon as Possible'.<sup>18</sup> How quickly Assheton was able to fulfil this promise is unknown, but he may have had some difficulties for soon after he made it there occurred the most acute and prolonged depression in British sugar prices during the whole

18. Bristol Central Library, Jefferies Collection, vol. 13, Hobhouse papers.

eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> By weakening the capacity of slave factors, acting on behalf of Bristol traders, to recover planters' debts arising from slave purchases, the depression in sugar prices from 1730 to 1736 may have played an important part in bringing about an abrupt halt in 1734 to over two decades of almost continuous expansion in Bristol slaving activity.

The constant uncertainties of slaving and the resultant variable nature of its profits influenced both the patterns of investment in the trade and its commercial organisation. Contemporary commentators asserted that the possibility of making windfall profits attracted much speculative investment into it, often from small tradesmen.<sup>20</sup> Ascertaining the precise level of such investment is impossible but shipping patterns suggest that there was some speculative investment in Bristol's case. Almost 600 vessels undertook slaving voyages from the port during the eighteenth century, each vessel making on average just under four voyages. Although voyages took 15 months to complete, the trade seems to have been marked by a high turnover of vessels. To some extent this may have reflected the comparatively high rate of loss of ships in the trade. It is possible also that slave ships were subject to relatively high rates of depreciation as they spent long periods in tropical waters where they would be ravaged by toredo worms. However, wear and tear on ships and losses at sea cannot fully explain the high turnover of ships. Closer examination of shipping statistics shows in fact that many vessels made only one or two slaving voyages before leaving the trade. They were often owned, furthermore, by small and irregular investors in the trade. By contrast, some 120 vessels, or about a fifth of those involved in the trade, each made at least five voyages to the coast and accounted for almost half of Bristol's total slaving ventures. Within this group there were 30 vessels that each sailed at least ten times to the coast and completed together about a fifth of the port's slaving ventures. Most notable amongst them was the *Berkeley Gally* which was built in Bristol in 1705 and undertook no less than 25 slaving voyages between 1706 and 1740. Like other vessels regularly involved in the trade, the *Berkeley Gally* was mainly owned by some of the largest of Bristol's investors in slaving.

19. On sugar prices, see R.B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery* (Barbados, 1974), pp. 496-497.

20. [James Wallace], *A General and Descriptive History of the Ancient and Present State of the Town of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1795), p. 231.

Consistent with the contention that the slave trade attracted speculative investors, shipping data also point to the existence of a core of investors who were regular shareholders in the various partnerships that financed and organised slaving voyages. Despite the large amount of literature on the trade, our understanding of the workings and internal management structure of slaving partnerships is still very imperfect. Published studies of partnerships to date have been confined to single ventures for which we have detailed accounts.<sup>21</sup> However, complete lists of partners have survived for some 130 Bristol slaving voyages, mostly in the period from 1789 to 1795 whilst partial lists are available for a further 200 or so voyages over the rest of the century.<sup>22</sup> Some of these lists cover more than one voyage by the same ship. According to the complete lists, two to three partners were involved on average in a Bristol slaving venture. A smaller number than historians have commonly assumed, this figure may be distorted in fact by the heavy representation in this sample of voyages after 1789 when Bristol slaving was in decline and had perhaps ceased to be attractive to new investors. Significantly, no less than 53 of Bristol's 122 slaving ventures between 1789 and 1795 were fitted out by single owners, each of them substantial established investors in the trade. By contrast, lists of owners, both partial and complete, for voyages undertaken before 1776, when Bristol's interest in the trade was more buoyant, suggest that in the first three quarters of the century slaving ventures normally attracted between four and six shareholders on average, although one occasionally finds slave ships with a single owner, such as the *Stonedge* in 1708, or, as with the *Kingston* in 1759, with ten or more owners.

The size of slaving partnerships inevitably resulted in frequent changes in membership, whether through the death, retirement or financial embarrassment of partners, or simply dissatisfaction with the outcome of ventures. Such changes were facilitated by the fact that each venture was a separate enterprise; the financial settlement at the end of a voyage thus provided an opportunity for changes in investors and their shareholdings. These varied from

21. W.E. Minchinton, 'The Voyage of the *Snow Africa*', *Mariner's Mirror*, 37 (1951), pp. 187–196.

22. For 1789–1795, see P.R.O. T 64/286. Partial lists were constructed largely from Colonial Naval Office Shipping Records and J.W. Damer Powell, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War* (Bristol, 1930), *passim*.





relatively straightforward adjustments such as John Collet's relinquishing of his one-tenth holding in the *Molly* in 1752 to his former partners Jeremiah Ames and John Fowler, to more complex changes, such as those that followed the completion of the *Africa* snow's voyages in 1774–5. In this instance four of the eight investors retired from the partnership to be replaced by three new investors before the vessel embarked on its next slaving voyage in 1776. These changes were accompanied by some re-arrangement in the size of shareholdings, with John Chilcott in particular increasing his share from one-eighth in 1774 to five-sixteenths in 1776.

Bristol slaving ventures attracted investors from a wide variety of economic and social backgrounds. Included in lists of owners one finds, for instance, residents of Birmingham and London as well as places even further afield. Thus Robert Harper and Stephen Withall, slave factors in Barbados and St Kitts respectively, were shareholders in the *Raymond Gally* in 1718 and the *Nightingale* in 1722, whilst Benjamin Smith and Miles Brewton, merchants and factors of Charles Town in South Carolina, were part-owners of the *Kingston* in 1759. Close inspection of lists of shareholders reveals, however, that the overwhelming majority of investors in slaving voyages came from within the commercial and seafaring population of Bristol itself or its surrounding counties. A detailed analysis of the backgrounds and occupations of all the known local investors cannot be undertaken here, but a brief examination of the owners of four vessels – the *Dispatch*, *Unity*, *Molly*, and *Africa* – is instructive. Accounts and full lists of owners have survived for six voyages made by these vessels during the half century before 1776. Altogether 24 individuals or firms held shares in one of these vessels, whilst one, Isaac Hobhouse, held shares in two. Only two of these investors – Samuel Galton and Son of Birmingham and James Ruscombe of Bridgwater, both shareholders in the *Africa* in 1774 – are known to have lived permanently outside of Bristol, although John Coghlan appears to have moved from Bristol to London before his appearance as a shareholder in the *Africa* in 1774. Identification of the occupations or business interests of all but one of the 25 shareholders in these vessels has proved possible. Excluding two investors who are difficult to classify – James Ruscombe of Bridgwater, and Henry West, Haven Master at Bristol from 1759 to 1767 and shareholder in the *Molly* in 1750 and 1752 – the remaining investors fell into three broad occupational groupings. The first group was composed of

tradesmen or manufacturers. It included John Collet, a manager of the Whitsun Court Sugar House in Bristol, whose business interests depended indirectly on the slave trade, as well as Samuel Galton and Son, a Birmingham gun-making firm, Thomas Lucas and Son, hoopers, and Bright Davis and Co., cordage manufacturers, all of whom benefited directly from the fitting out of slave ships for the coast.<sup>23</sup> The second group, comprising six men, was composed of ship masters or former masters. With one exception, all had been or were masters of Bristol slave ships. The ownership of shares in slaving ventures by masters was by no means unusual and was perhaps encouraged by other investors, for it offered them some insurance that masters would try to use the discretionary powers they had to be given, particularly in the conduct of trade to West Africa, to the best possible effect. Furthermore, the wages, commissions and investment income that masters earned during their years commanding voyages allowed them to continue to invest in slaving ventures after their retirement from the sea. In some instances, including the case of John Fowler, commander of the *Molly* in 1750 and 1752, retired masters came to assume, as we will see, positions of major managerial responsibility in the Bristol slave trade.

The final and largest group of investors with twelve members was composed of merchants. Complete information about the outfitting costs of these six voyages and their apportionment amongst shareholders is unfortunately lacking but it is evident that most of the capital invested in them was supplied by merchants. How far these men might be regarded as specialists in the trade is problematical, for although some eighteenth-century Bristol merchants were described in local directories after 1775 as Guinea or African merchants, all those involved in these six voyages were clearly interested also in other trades and activities.<sup>24</sup> As one might anticipate, all were involved to some degree in the sugar or tobacco trades, whilst some had even more diversified interests. For instance, Noblet Ruddock, shareholder in the *Dispatch's* venture in 1725, was actively concerned in trade with Ireland and Europe, whilst James Rogers, investor in the *Africa* snow's

23. I.V. Hall, 'Whitsun Court Sugar House, Bristol, 1665-1824', *Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 65 (1944), pp. 4, 69; Minchinton, 'Snow Africa', *op. cit.*, p. 189.

24. John Powell was described as a 'Guinea Merchant' and Thomas Jones as an 'African merchant' in *Sketchley's Bristol Directory* (1775).

voyages in 1774 and 1776, was a partner in voyages to Newfoundland and in an insurance underwriting business.<sup>25</sup> None of the merchants involved in these six voyages, therefore, specialised exclusively in slave trading. Given the well-recognised hazards of the trade this was hardly surprising, and was no doubt typical of all other Bristol merchants investing in slaving voyages, whether they were described as African merchants or not.

It would be misleading, however, to assume from this discussion of the investors in these six voyages that there was no significant concentration of ownership or management of slaving voyages at Bristol. Lack of information about the investors in the great majority of Bristol slaving voyages prevents one from analysing levels of concentration of investment in the trade but it is possible to examine patterns of managerial control of it. As the London merchants, Higginson, Bernard and Wheler explained in 1793 in petitioning for the recovery of debts from the Bristol slave trader, James Rogers, the management of slaving voyages was normally assumed by one of the partners involved in the venture:

it is the custom and usage in the African Trade for the parties who are Owners of the Ship to be interested in the Cargo and the event of the Voyage in proportion to their respective shares in the vessel but that one of such Owners Acts as the Ships Husband and has the sole management of purchasing the Cargo and fitting out the Ship.<sup>26</sup>

Consequently the partnership came to be referred to by the name of the 'ship's husband' or, as he was sometimes known, the 'purser' or 'agent'. Often one of the larger shareholders, the agent's responsibilities seem to have been even greater than Higginson, Bernard and Wheler claimed. In addition to supervising the selection of the outward-bound cargo of trade goods and the outfitting of the vessel, he corresponded with the master whilst the latter was abroad, gave detailed instructions to factors in the Caribbean or North America for the sale of the slaves and the remittance of the proceeds, and, at the conclusion of the voyage, paid off the crew, sold any produce brought home, finalised the accounts, and distributed the profits.

The origins of this system of managing slaving voyages are

25. On Ruddock, see Bristol Record Office, Noblet Ruddock Shipping Notes, 1719-1721; on Rogers, see P.R.O. C 107/1-15.

26. P.R.O. C 107/4.

uncertain, but it may have been adapted from the East India trade; like slaving voyages, East India voyages frequently involved a large number of partners and the ownership of the vessel by the trading group.<sup>27</sup> Whatever its origins, the system provided no immediate financial rewards to the agent himself. No specific payment appears to have been made to the agent by his partners for discharging his responsibilities, even though these at times may have created severe problems for the agent. As James Rogers discovered in 1793, for example, the agent of slaving voyages might be prosecuted by suppliers of trade goods when one or more of his partners proved to be recalcitrant in clearing their shares of the debts accumulated by the partnership in fitting out ventures. Why, knowing this, Rogers or any other partner in slaving voyages was willing to accept the position of ship's husband or agent, is unclear. However, investors who became agents were very often 'sleeping partners' in other slaving voyages at the same time. Accepting the responsibility for managing some voyages, therefore, may have been one of the prices paid by regular investors in the trade for spreading their risks.

Central to the organisation and management of the slave trade, agents had much influence on both the immediate outcome of voyages and Bristol's longer term position in it. For these reasons it is important that we improve our knowledge of them. Fortunately, available trade and shipping records for Bristol allow one to trace the names of probable agents for almost 2,100 or 99.5 per cent of the port's slaving voyages between 1698 and 1807. The list runs to 290 names, suggesting that agents managed on average some seven slaving voyages each. Such a figure disguises, however, marked inequalities between agents in the number of voyages they managed. Thus, for instance, no less than 120 agents managed only one voyage each whereas 53 agents each managed ten or more voyages; together, the latter were responsible for organising over 1,500 or almost three-quarters of Bristol's eighteenth-century slaving ventures. The names of these leading agents, with the number of voyages they managed, are listed in the Appendix. Included in this list are six of the partners in the voyages of the four ships we discussed earlier. These six men – John Anderson, John Fowler, Isaac Hobhouse, James Laroche, James Rogers and Noblet Ruddock – were amongst the élite of eighteenth-century

27. Sutherland, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–125.

Capt. John Fowler.

Bristol August 15<sup>th</sup> 1732.

We continue for the Command of our Snow Molly and Order you to  
Enquire into your Wind of Jun. that you are in the Coast of Africa if  
there is found at Capetown with them slaves that will be the best place to barter  
your Goods and make your purchase of Negroes. But if that is not practicable then at  
Mombasa or Swazie just where you can purchase the best slaves and have the quickest  
Dispatch only observe that his service you purchase at least 90% of the Male Spine  
a strong slender good healthy man and men keep. altho the purchase may beed other  
well they will find best at whatever market they are disposed of.

As the Company is longer in coming to L2843, 14. 10. we expect to  
purchase more Negroes than our Snow can carry. we therefore recommend  
to purchase Teeth of all Slaves or any thing else you know or think will turn  
to our Advantage.

Instructions to a captain to sail to Angola with a cargo worth £2843 14s 10d to barter for slaves and  
elephants' teeth.

Account Book of the snow Molly from a microfilm copy in the City of Bristol Record Office no. F 47.

slaving agents. Together they managed some 400 slaving ventures, with Laroche, the most important of all Bristol agents, managing over 130 alone. Powerful in managerial terms, men such as these also had a major impact on levels of investment in the trade, for as indicated previously they were, according to available lists of owners, frequently investors in voyages organised by others. Furthermore their reputation as agents and their commercial connections were probably important factors in the formation of slaving partnerships and attracting additional capital into the trade. Organisationally and perhaps financially, therefore, the 53 agents listed in the Appendix dominated the eighteenth-century Bristol slave trade.

How did these men become the leading Bristol slave traders? Were there any significant changes in the degree of control exercised by the leading agents over time or in the backgrounds of agents, particularly after 1739 when Bristol's slave trade was in decline? To what extent can that decline be attributable to managerial or entrepreneurial failure by them? And, what part did these agents play in the political and social life of eighteenth-century Bristol?

Clearly, detailed answers to such questions cannot be attempted here but some tentative suggestions might be made by means of a brief examination of the social origins and careers of the leading agents. Information about the economic and social backgrounds of over 40 of these agents, including almost all those who managed 20 or more voyages, has been found.<sup>28</sup> This shows that recruitment of agents took place essentially from within a local or at best regional catchment area rather than a national one. Some agents, it is true, came originally from places some distance from Bristol; James Laroche was from London, John Becher from Cork and Robert Gordon from Scotland. Almost all the remaining agents, however, seem to have been born in either Bristol itself or the West Country and South Wales. The geographical origins of slaving agents thus largely reflected Bristol's position as a provincial capital in the eighteenth century.

Socially, the backgrounds of agents were varied. According to the Bristol apprenticeship lists for this period, the fathers of five agents – John Cross, Peter Day, Robert Gordon, James Laroche

28. Based on the Bristol Apprenticeship Lists and Burgess Rolls held at the Bristol Record Office.

and Edmund Saunders – were gentlemen, whilst the evidence suggests that several others, including Henry Dampier, Richard Henvill and Joseph Iles, probably came from landed backgrounds. Respectable, if not necessarily always wealthy, most of these men were apprenticed to Bristol merchants and became agents of slaving voyages during the first half of the eighteenth century. At the other extreme socially were those who had been at sea, often as masters of slave ships, or had at least been apprenticed as mariners. John Anderson, John Chilcott, John Fowler, David Hamilton and James McTaggart, for example, were all masters of Bristol slave ships early in their careers, whilst William Challoner and James Day were mariners by training.<sup>29</sup> Overall, the contribution of men from seafaring backgrounds to the management of slaving voyages was particularly notable during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Although a significant number of agents came from either genteel or maritime backgrounds, most had immediate mercantile and commercial origins. As one would expect, a large proportion were merchants or their sons. Thomas Power, for instance, was the son of a Bideford merchant, whilst Michael Becher, Thomas Freke, William and Joseph Jefferies, Walter and Richard Lougher, and Francis Rogers were all descended from established Bristol merchant families. A surprisingly large number of agents, however, were known as tradesmen or were the sons of tradesmen. They covered, moreover, a wide variety of trades. Robert Tunbridge was a soapmaker by trade, Walter Jenkins a mercer and Henry Tonge a stuffmaker, whilst Charles Scandret and James Rumsey were both grocers, and Richard Farr, senior and junior, were ropemakers. Similarly, the fathers of agents included a clothier, brewer, distiller, pharmacist, tailor and house carpenter. Although the father of one agent, Thomas Deane, came from Chard, agents related to tradesmen were mainly born in Bristol and were usually apprenticed there. The variety of trades represented by these agents and their fathers makes it difficult to assess their financial status early in their careers. Some undoubtedly experienced financial hardship whilst others were evidently fairly affluent. Thus, for instance, Thomas Sims, the son of a tailor who

29. It appears, for instance, that Fowler had spent seven years as a master of slave ships from 1750 to 1757, whilst Hamilton had been a master for 12 years between 1750 and 1762. P.R.O. CO 267/13, deposition of 21 February 1767.



died early, had to rely on charity in order to pay his apprenticeship fee of £10 to Walter Lougher in December 1746, whereas £70 was paid in 1726 from the estate of Edward Bright, distiller, to apprentice his son, Henry, to William Barnsdale, and William Deane, clothier, paid £157. 10s. in 1733 to apprentice his son, Thomas, to Richard Farr junior.

The social and economic origins of agents appear to have had a marked impact on the pattern of their careers in Bristol. In particular they influenced the social and political rôles they played in the city and even affected the age at which men first assumed responsibility for managing slaving voyages. Foremost amongst the major centres of social life in eighteenth-century Bristol was the Society of Merchant Venturers, which also served as an outlet for the expression of grievances for Bristol merchants.<sup>30</sup> Agents of slaving voyages played a prominent part in its activities. During the course of the eighteenth century, some 32 of the leading agents became members of the Society and 16 went on to become master of the Society. With very few exceptions, those agents who reached the highest office of the Society of Merchant Venturers had been either born into or apprenticed to a Bristol merchant family.<sup>31</sup> The political life of Bristol revolved at this time around the Common Council, and here again leading agents of slaving voyages figured prominently. Seventeen became common councillors during the century, of whom sixteen became sheriff, ten alderman and eleven mayor. With the exception of John Anderson, who became mayor in 1783–4, all the agents who held political office were closely connected with the established mercantile families of Bristol, whether by birth or apprenticeship.

Why agents unconnected with such families largely failed to penetrate the higher echelons of social and political life in Bristol is uncertain. To a large extent it probably reflected the relatively closed and élitist structure of Bristol society at that time, but it may also have been due in part to the fact that agents who were sons of tradesmen or former masters were normally obliged to spend the first quarter century or so of their adult life laying the foundations of their business career rather than pursuing political or social ambitions. Available evidence suggests that those con-

30. P. McGrath, *The Merchant Venturers of Bristol* (Bristol, 1975), chapters 8–10; W.E. Minchinton (ed.), *Politics and the Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, Bristol Record Society's Publications, 23 (1961), pp. xi–xxxv.

31. A.B. Beavan, *Bristol Lists, Municipal and Miscellaneous* (Bristol, 1899).



nected with merchant families often became managers of slaving ventures within ten years or so of commencing their apprenticeship. They were, in other words, agents in many instances before they reached the age of 30. Some sons of tradesmen, notably Thomas Deane and Richard Farr junior – both of whom incidentally became common councillors – also managed slaving voyages at a comparatively early age, but the evidence suggests that in most instances tradesmen and their sons as well as former masters were often around 40 or so before they became managers of ventures.

These differences in the ages at which men assumed responsibility for managing slaving ventures stemmed primarily from the advantages of wealth and access to commercial contacts and knowledge enjoyed by those related or closely allied to merchant families. Social origin was not, of course, an infallible guide to the financial position of men in early adulthood but it seems likely that those from mercantile and perhaps landed backgrounds were better situated financially earlier in their careers than others. With regard to contacts and information, there is even less doubt that sons of merchants possessed clear advantages. Born into established commercial networks, several sons of slave merchants soon followed their fathers into the trade. John Becher was succeeded by his son, Michael; Joseph Jefferies by his son, Thomas; and Philip Freke by his son, Thomas. Furthermore, merchants extended their commercial contacts by marriage, with seemingly beneficial consequences for the formation of slaving partnerships. Noblet Ruddock and his brother-in-law Philip Harris, both merchants, were amongst the owners of the *Triton* in 1719, whilst Francis Rogers and his three brothers-in-law, John Corseley and Richard and William Hawkesworth were part-owners of the *Peterborough* in 1711. Francis' son, Robert, was later concerned with Corseley as well as Richard Hawkesworth in other slaving ventures.

Illustrative of the part played by merchant marriage alliances in promoting slaving ventures, the *Peterborough's* voyage in 1711 also highlights one other important connection involving merchants that shaped the management of Bristol's slave trade. The agent for this voyage was Richard Henvill. Apparently of landed origins and apprenticed to Francis Rogers in 1703, Henvill first emerged as a manager of slaving voyages six years after starting his apprenticeship; there seems little doubt that his rapid advancement owed much to his association with Rogers. The pattern of

Henvill's early career was one subsequently followed by other prominent agents from landed or genteel backgrounds during the first half of the eighteenth century. Thus John Cross, Henry Dampier, Peter Day, Joseph Iles and James Laroche all became, like Henvill, agents within a year or so of completing their apprenticeship to Bristol merchants involved in slaving.

Close connection with slave trading merchants, whether through birth, marriage or apprenticeship, continued to play some part in the recruitment and training of agents during the second half of the eighteenth century. For instance, William Gordon was followed into the trade by his nephew and apprentice, Robert Gordon. Similarly, Thomas Sims was introduced to the trade by his master and benefactor, the merchant Walter Lougher, whilst marriage to the daughter of Richard Meyler, a sugar merchant and slave trader, was probably instrumental in advancing Henry Bright's career into management of slaving voyages.<sup>32</sup> Despite all this, however, it is apparent that the methods by which agents were recruited and trained changed significantly after 1750. Ties of marriage and apprenticeship amongst agents seem to have declined substantially, reflecting to some extent the trade's increasing inability to continue to attract both men and capital from established Bristol merchant families and their allies. In their absence, management of slaving voyages after 1750 tended to pass more and more into the hands of either former masters of slave ships or men of somewhat obscure origins. Retired masters emerged as a particularly important group of agents during the two decades before 1776, most of them having served prominent agents such as James Laroche and Henry Bright during the 1740s and 1750s and thereby acquiring no doubt the financial means, knowledge and commercial contacts necessary to become managers. Furthermore, together with James and Thomas Jones and James Rogers, each of whom had apparently moved to the city from South Wales just prior to the War of American Independence, they were very largely responsible for sustaining Bristol's interest in the slave trade in the decade or so after 1783. The social origins and training of Bristol's leading slave traders at the end of the eighteenth century were thus very different from what they had been at the beginning.

32. Bright had also spent part of his life in the Caribbean. John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), p. 473.

Why men with seemingly fewer natural advantages should have gained control over Bristol slave trading during its final forty years or so is unclear. However, the declining involvement by established merchant families and their close associates coincided to a large extent with Bristol's loss of ascendancy in the trade to Liverpool. It is conceivable therefore that, when faced with the challenge of their northern rivals, traditional slave trading groups in Bristol sought to place their resources into safer enterprises, leaving investment and managerial responsibility for the trade in the hands of others, including those with practical and first-hand experience of slaving such as ship masters. Certainly, the surviving wills of eighteenth-century Bristol merchants show that with the exception of those like Thomas Power who died early, leaving the 'great part' of his estate in 'Ships and parts of Ships and Effects on Board in fforeign parts',<sup>33</sup> most were investing by the mid-eighteenth century much of their wealth from slave trading and other ventures in land, property or the funds. In some instances such investments were considerable. Henry Tonge, for example, was reputed to have left £50,000 at his death in 1762; apart from shares in the Bristol Crown Fire Office and a brass and copper company at Baptist Mills, the latter related perhaps to his former slaving activities, the estate consisted essentially of landed properties purchased by Tonge for his sons in the counties surrounding Bristol.<sup>34</sup>

Closer inspection of wills and other evidence suggests a further, alternative explanation for the failure of early eighteenth-century Bristol slave trading families to continue their involvement in the trade much beyond mid-century. A cursory glance at the Appendix reveals that there was a low replacement rate of major slave traders within Bristol families. Only five families produced two generations of managers of ten or more slaving voyages in fact, and in two of these cases – the Andersons and the Gordons – the men concerned were related by marriage rather than birth. It is probable that this list of names provides a somewhat pessimistic picture of the lack of continuity of participation in the trade by Bristol families, for it contains only managers of ten or more

33. For the will of Thomas Power, see P.R.O., P.C.C., PROB 11/760, proved 11 March 1748.

34. *Bonner's Bristol Journal*, 8 January 1785; P.R.O., P.C.C., PROB 11/873, proved 6 February 1762.



**TO BE SOLD**, on board the  
 Ship *Bance-Yland*, on tuesday the 6th  
 of May next, at *Ashley-Ferry*; a choice  
 cargo of about 250 fine healthy

## **NEGROES,**



just arrived from the  
*Windward & Rice Coast.*



—The utmost care has  
 already been taken, and  
 shall be continued, to keep them free from  
 the least danger of being infected with the  
**SMALL-POX**, no boat having been on  
 board, and all other communication with  
 people from *Charles-Town* prevented.

*Austin, Laurens, & Appleby.*

*A. B.* Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the  
**SMALL-POX** in their own Country.

An advertisement for an auction of a cargo of slaves to be held in  
 Charleston.

voyages. Several of these managers, notably Peter Day, Thomas Freke, James Laroche and Francis Rogers, were either preceded or succeeded in the trade by relatives who organised over five voyages. Nevertheless, it is still clear that few Bristol families were successful in producing more than one generation of notable managers of slaving ventures. To some extent this may have reflected the risky and uncertain nature of the trade itself, for at least five leading agents – John Cross, Richard Farr junior, James Rogers, Noblet Ruddock and James Rumsey – went bankrupt, as

also did some rising slave traders such as Robert Francis.<sup>35</sup> As a factor inhibiting the re-generation of slave traders within Bristol families, however, financial failure was clearly overshadowed by demographic problems. Particularly striking was the inability of the second and largest generation of leading Bristol agents during the 1720s and 1730s, when the port's interest in the trade was at its height, to produce during the next quarter century new agents from within their own close families. Only Richard Farr of this second generation of agents was succeeded by his son as a substantial Bristol slave trader after 1750. The remaining agents either encouraged their children to pursue careers in other, perhaps safer, fields of activity or failed to produce an heir capable of sustaining the family's involvement in the trade. Most fell into the latter category. Five of the twenty-five or so leading agents of the 1720s and 1730s died as bachelors, whilst ten of those who married do not seem to have had a direct male heir when they died. Furthermore, three of those who had sons, died before their children reached maturity. Overall, therefore, demographic problems within the second generation of Bristol's leading slave trading families seem to have been as significant as any factor in weakening the attachment of these families to the slave trade in the mid-eighteenth century.

The relationship of this demographic experience of Bristol's major slave traders between 1720 and 1739 to the wider issue of the port's loss of leadership in the trade to Liverpool is a question that requires further research. Although it is known that a few Liverpool families were interested in the slave trade for up to three generations, our knowledge of that port's slave traders as a whole is still too flimsy to permit any detailed comparison of the slaving communities in the two ports.<sup>36</sup> The evidence available does indicate, however, that Liverpool was challenging Bristol's supremacy in the trade before the War of Austrian Succession and

35. Lists of bankrupts are to be found in W.E. Minchinton (ed.), *The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, Bristol Record Society's Publications, 20 (1957), pp. 184-191. How far such bankruptcies arose from slaving is unclear but some certainly failed whilst they were still active slave traders.

36. Mr M.M. Schofield is currently working on the Liverpool Plantation Registers and his research will undoubtedly increase substantially our knowledge of the Liverpool slave merchants. Our knowledge at the moment is largely confined to small groups of merchants or single families such as the Davenports and Tarletons.



overtook its south-western rival during the course of that war. According to contemporaries, Liverpool's success rested on lower shipping costs and a greater willingness to engage in supplying slaves illicitly to the Spanish colonists in the New World.<sup>37</sup> Historians have subsequently pointed to other factors that may have assisted the rise of Liverpool traders, notably their proximity to an expanding industrial hinterland and their relative remoteness from the main centres of enemy privateering activity in wartime. The advantages afforded by location were perhaps reflected in Liverpool's maintenance of higher levels of slaving activity in wartime from 1739 to 1807 than either Bristol or London.

Reference to these broader factors should not lead in my view to a casual dismissal of the impact that the actions and decisions of Bristol traders themselves may have had on the decline of their slaving activities. Compared to their Liverpool counterparts, Bristol merchants seem, for instance, to have been slow in promoting port improvements during the eighteenth century, and this may have contributed to rising shipping costs and increased turnaround times for vessels in Bristol, matters of some significance for such a long-winded and competitive business as slave trading.<sup>38</sup> Similarly the failure of Bristol's second generation of slave traders to produce obvious successors may help to explain the very incomplete recovery of Bristol's interest in the trade after 1748, whether in comparison with Liverpool's slave trade or the other major trades, including sugar, in which Bristol was involved. By stemming the flow of both capital and managerial skills into the port's slaving activity during this critical phase of the developing competition with Liverpool, the demographic difficulties of Bristol's second generation of slave traders perhaps finally ensured their port's removal as an effective rival to Liverpool during the last sixty years of the British Atlantic slave trade.

37. [Wallace], *Descriptive History of Liverpool*, *op. cit.*, pp. 214–215.

38. A.F. Williams, 'Bristol Port Plans and Improvement Schemes of the Eighteenth Century', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 81 (1962).

## APPENDIX

### *Leading Agents of Bristol Slaving Voyages 1698–1807*

(Qualification = 10 voyages)

<i>Agents</i>	<i>Voyages Managed</i>	<i>Period of Management</i>
ANDERSON, né YOUNG, Charles	16	1797–1805
ANDERSON, John	66	1764–1797
BECHER, John	28	1711–1732
BECHER, Michael	25	1727–1752
BRIGHT, Henry	21	1749–1766
CHALLONER, William	13	1714–1726
CHILCOTT, John	12	1770–1777
COGHLAN, John	10	1759–1781
CROSS, John	16	1737–1747
DAMPIER, Henry	34	1727–1744
DAY, James	56	1711–1742
DAY, Peter	20	1711–1734
DEANE, Thomas	40	1747–1764
DOLMAN, Thomas	11	1714–1730
DUCKINFIELD, John	23	1714–1730
FARR, Richard	37	1726–1745
FARR, Richard, junior	20	1747–1772
FOWLER, John	77	1758–1777
FREKE, Thomas	14	1716–1731
GORDON, Robert	14	1751–1767
GORDON, William	25	1729–1757
GRANT, Abel	14	1721–1743
HAMILTON, David	28	1766–1778
HARE, William	38	1729–1752
HARRIS, Philip	16	1715–1726
HENVILL, Richard	30	1709–1744
HOBHOUSE, Isaac	44	1722–1747
HOOKE, Abraham	23	1702–1727
ILES, Joseph	19	1720–1750
JACOB, Samuel	40	1716–1747
JEFFERIS, Joseph	12	1717–1734
JEFFERIS, William	34	1713–1747
JENKINS, Walter	11	1732–1741
JONES, James	68	1783–1795
JONES, Thomas	34	1767–1794
LAROCHE, James	132	1728–1769

LOUGHER, Richard and Walter <sup>1</sup>	15	1725–1745
LOUGHER, Walter	34	1732–1760
McTAGGART, James	14	1771–1787
PENNINGTON, Thomas	13	1734–1749
POWELL, John	58	1755–1776
POWER, Thomas	13	1734–1748
ROGERS, Francis	10	1700–1714
ROGERS, James	51	1783–1792
RUDDOCK, Noblet	30	1712–1725
RUMSEY, James	20	1753–1762
SAUNDERS, Edmund	32	1723–1739
SCANDRET, Charles and Christopher <sup>2</sup>	10	1729–1738
SIMS, Thomas	25	1763–1772
TONGE, Henry	42	1730–1753
TUNBRIDGE, Robert	18	1708–1721
WAY, Joseph	17	1702–1720

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Source: See text

Notes:

1. Richard Lougher also managed 8 voyages on his own between 1722 and 1728.
2. Charles Scandret also managed 6 voyages with John Scandret between 1721 and 1728.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Despite the fact that the slave trade has often been regarded as a major contributor to Bristol's prosperity in its eighteenth-century golden age, it has been relatively neglected as a serious field of study by the port's historians. Apart from the late Professor MacInnes' *Bristol and the Slave Trade*, published in this series in 1963 and Professor Minchinton's study of the *Africa* snow's voyage in 1774 in *Mariner's Mirror* in 1951, consideration of Bristol's involvement in the slave trade has largely been confined to single chapters of studies of either Bristol's overseas trade in general, such as Professor MacInnes' *A Gateway of Empire* (Bristol 1939) or the Atlantic slave trade as a whole, such as J.A. Rawley's, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (N.Y., 1981), chap. 8. A detailed study of the volume, organisation and commercial structure of the Bristol slave trade has yet to be published; this pamphlet hopefully represents the first stage of such a study.

Information about the number of Bristol vessels participating each year in the slave trade between 1698 and 1807 is available from a variety of sources. The most significant are the Exchequer K.R. Port Books (P.R.O. Series E 190) from 1698 to 1789 and the Mediterranean Passes (P.R.O. Adm. papers) from 1730 onwards. The data derived from these sources may be supplemented by statistics compiled from other records, notably the Bristol Presentments (Bristol Central Library) from 1770 onwards; the Bristol Muster Rolls (Society of Merchant Ventures) from 1747 to 1787; P.R.O. Treasury Papers, Miscellaneous series, from 1736 to 1754 and 1789 to 1795; and Parliamentary Papers from 1772 onwards. Some of these sources, particularly the Mediterranean Passes and Muster Rolls, also provide valuable data about vessels and their crews, and together with the Colonial Naval Office Shipping Lists (P.R.O. CO Series), allow one to ascertain the tonnage, manning levels and the date and place of construction and registration of many Bristol slave ships.

In addition to shipping information, the Naval Office Lists and Port Books supply details of the investors in slaving voyages, particularly the agents. Detailed lists of shareholders may also be obtained from Treasury Papers (especially T64/286 for 1789 to 1795), Parliamentary Papers, and J.W. Damer Powell's study, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War* (Bristol, 1930), which uses the series of letters of marque. Evidence relating to the origins and careers of slave traders, notably the agents listed in the appendix, was gleaned from the Bristol Apprenticeship Lists and Burgess Rolls (Bristol Record Office), their wills (mainly in P.R.O. Prerogative Court of Canterbury) and A.B. Beaven's, *Bristol Lists, Municipal and Miscellaneous* (Bristol, 1899).

Relatively few of the private papers of eighteenth-century Bristol slave traders have survived, but those that have give much insight into the complexity and hazards of the trade. The Jefferies Mss, vol. XIII in the Bristol Central Library contains some correspondence of Isaac Hobhouse, including the manifest and captain's instructions relating to the voyage of the *Dispatch* brigantine in 1725. Some of this material has been reprinted in Elizabeth Donnan's *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington, 1930-4), esp. vol. 2 and in volume 20 of the Bristol Record Society's Publications, edited by W.E. Minchinton. Complete accounts of Bristol slaving voyages are scarce, but the microfilm held in the Bristol Record Office of the Bright family papers includes the accounts for two voyages of the *Molly* snow in 1750-52, whilst the Bristol Museum holds the logbook for two voyages made by the *Africa* snow in 1774-76. The first voyage of the *Africa* in 1774 was the subject of Professor Minchinton's article in *Mariner's Mirror* referred to earlier. The most illuminating source of information about the business aspects of the Bristol slave trade, however, is the papers of the bankrupt, James Rogers (P.R.O. Chancery Masters' Exhibits, C 107/1-15). Sadly these contain only a few complete balance sheets for voyages, but they include large numbers of invoices as well as a wealth of correspondence with suppliers of trade goods for the African coast, masters of slave ships, and factors in the New World. This voluminous collection thus allows one to study in remarkably close detail how the Bristol slave trade was organised and conducted.

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- 3 *The Theatre Royal: first seventy years* by Kathleen Barker. 40p.
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